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SUBJECT: NGOS CALL FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT WITH NORTH KOREA

REF: SEOUL 136

Sensitive but unclassified. Not for Internet distribution.

Summary

1. (U) The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) at Kyungnam University co-sponsored a human rights-focused North Korea donors conference February 4-5 in Seoul. Ambassador Stephens delivered opening remarks, highlighting the USG's commitment to democracy, development, and human rights in the DPRK and the importance of USG partnerships with the North Korean refugee and NGO communities in the ROK. Ambassador Bob King's congratulatory message was read by an NED official. The conference featured debates between NGO leaders, academics, and senior ROKG officials on issues ranging from the severity of the DPRK's economic crisis to improving the North's human rights record. The majority of the academics and NGO leaders at the conference called for greater engagement with, and economic assistance to, the DPRK. End Summary.

High-Profile DPRK Human Rights Conference...

2. (U) The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University held a major North Korea human rights conference February 4-5 in Seoul. The event was well-attended, drawing more than 200 participants from South Korean and foreign government ministries, embassies, donor agencies, foundations, and NGOs.

In remarks at the beginning of the conference, Ambassador Stephens highlighted the USG commitment's to democracy, development, and human rights in the DPRK and the importance of USG partnerships with North Korea-focused NGOs. She reviewed the USG's current initiatives, including the International Visitors' Program (IVLP), DRL funding for human rights NGOs and radio broadcasts into the DPRK, and the recent selection of Dr. Lee Ae-ran for an International Woman of Courage award. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues Bob King's congratulatory remarks were read by an NED official. Other VIP participants included National Assembly Speaker Kim Hyung-o, MOFAT Vice-Minister and former lead negotiator for the Six-Party Talks Chun Yung-woo, and ROK Ambassador-at-Large for Human Rights Jhe Seong-ho.

...Covers Denuclearization and Six-Party Talks...

3. (SBU) At a session that was closed to the press, Vice Minister Chun spoke candidly about the big-picture reality of inter-Korean relations. He said the ROKG would continue to pursue a "Denuclearization First" policy towards the DPRK.

Chun argued that the North's current charm offensive stemmed from an "existential crisis" that had allegedly made the regime "desperate to embrace anyone who can alleviate the pain" and financial squeeze of UN sanctions. The DPRK, he asserted, was "on life support" and the international community, especially the Five Parties, held "the oxygen mask."

...DPRK's Internal Situation...

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¶4. (U) Ministry of Unification Director-General for Intelligence and Analysis Yang Chang-seok told the participants that the DPRK's economy was continuing to deteriorate. He confirmed that North Korea's currency replacement was an effort to crack down on free market activity, curb inflation, legitimize the planned economy, and reduce differences between official and black market exchange rates; the effort, he indicated, had clearly failed (reftel).

Korea Institute for International Economic Policy Director Cho Myung-chul stressed that dealing with severe food shortages would be the most pressing issue for the DPRK in the next few months because the informal markets that once compensated for the failed public distribution system (PDS) were only now beginning to recover from the negative effects of the currency replacement fiasco.

...How to Foster Democracy in the North...

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¶5. (U) Park Hyeong-jung, a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Unification Studies (KINU), argued that promoting industrialization and modernization in the DPRK would be likely to generate democratic and human rights reform in North Korea over the long-term. Referencing the ROK's economic success under authoritarian rule, Kyungnam University Professor Phillip Park and the Venerable Pommyun Sunim, Chairman of The Peace Foundation, added that modernization must be achieved before any significant improvement in North Korea's human rights situation can be expected.

...A Call for Greater Engagement with the North...

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¶6. (U) NED President Carl Gershman called for greater engagement with North Korea by NGOs, urging them to pursue a "rights-based approach" to DPRK development programs that nurtured the idea among ordinary North Koreans that local government officials should be responsive and accountable to their respective communities. He argued that NGOs should focus on sectors like health, agriculture, finance, and teaching foreign languages because the Pyongyang regime currently welcomed such initiatives and because such programs helped erode the isolation that was an integral part of the DPRK political system. National Assembly Speaker Kim Hyung-o echoed Gershman's comments, calling for the creation of a pan-ROK task force to expand private sector exchanges with the North.

...and Making Use of Refugees and Technology

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¶7. (SBU) The majority of the conference participants acknowledged that the informal engagement occurring between North Korean refugees and their family members in the North via mobile phones/computers has been one of the most effective and under-recognized avenues for opening up DPRK society and directly engaging ordinary DPRK citizens. Gershman called for increased ROKG support for the education and economic empowerment of North Korean refugees, characterizing them as a "natural bridge for new partnerships" with the DPRK.

STEPHENS